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ABSTRACT

With the current focus on accountability for results, many schools are finding ways to continuously improve their practices and better meet the needs of all children. School districts, too, are focused on the goal of continuous improvement. Nine districts, remarkable for the success they have demonstrated in helping the majority of their schools, were studied for this report. Data were collected from site visits and interviews with virtually all role groups, including parents, school board members, teachers, and administrators. Core components of districtwide action for continuous improvement include a systemic approach, high-quality professional development, a vision that begins with a clear focus on student learning, communication that is highly valued and carefully planned, roles and structures that are defined for effective functioning, and data-driven decision-making. The report concludes with a list of possible actions district leaders could take to move their organizations more fully into continuous improvement. (Contains 17 references.) (RT)

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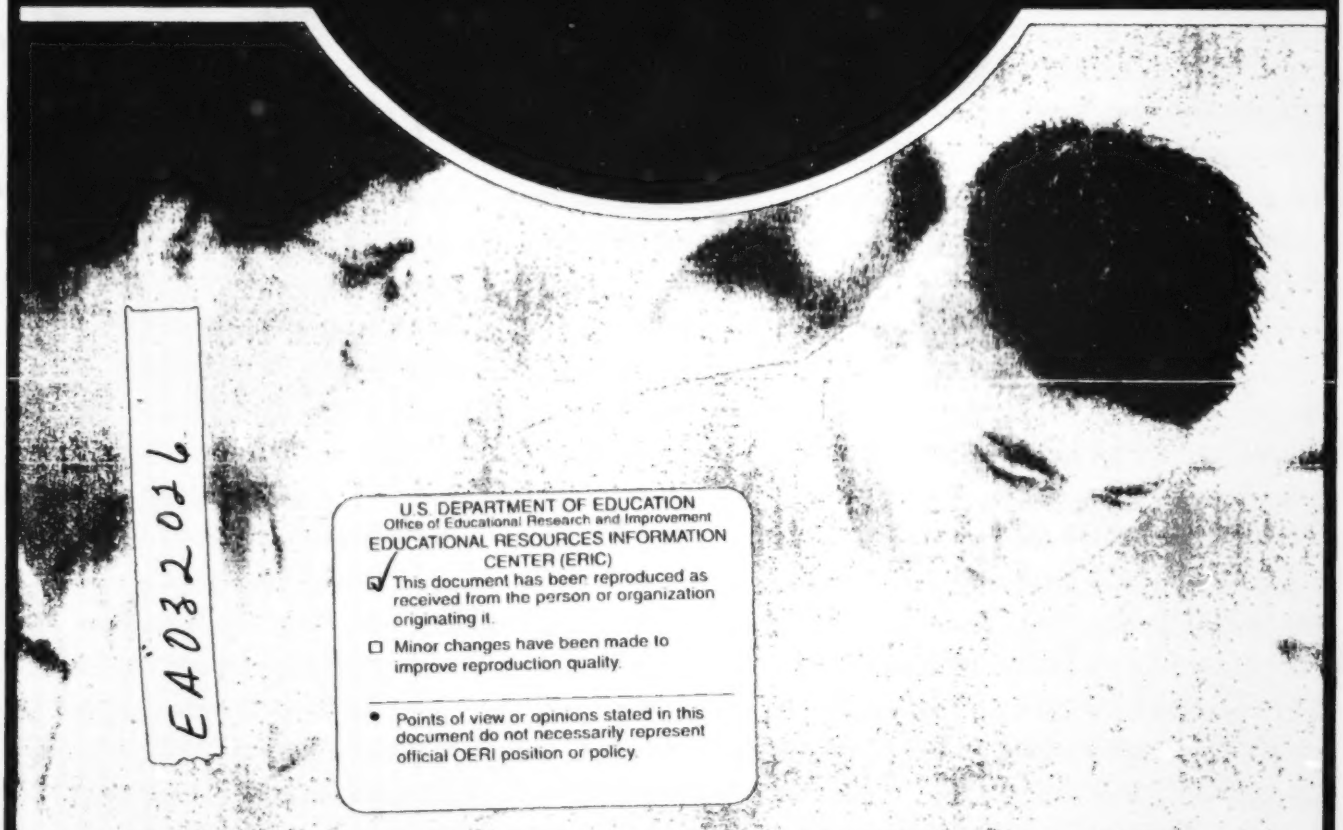
systems that support learning

# improving districts



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# Preface

With the current focus on accountability for results, many schools are finding ways to continuously improve their practices and better meet the needs of all children. School districts, too, are focused on the goal of continuous improvement. But it's hard for an entire district to mobilize. The nine districts studied for this report are remarkable for the success they have demonstrated in helping not just a few, but the majority of their schools — even those most challenged — to get better and keep getting better. Selected for the National Award for Model Professional Development, these exemplary districts met challenging criteria for high-quality professional development and student learning gains.

Recently, three Regional Educational Laboratories — WestEd, McREL, and NCREL — conducted a study of these districts. Data from site visits and interviews with virtually all role groups, including parents and school board members as well as teachers and administrators, reveal the ways in which staff development and professional growth have become the core of a coordinated system of continuous improvement in these districts. Learning has become a way of life, or, in the words of one teacher, "Our district is a place for professional growth. If I were designing a bumper sticker, it would say 'Broward County — Come Grow With Us.'"

To help others learn from what these districts have done, information from the study is being reported in two ways. One is this report, which highlights overall themes and implications for district decision-makers. A Web site (www.WestEd.org/districts) will also be developed to provide additional information about what these districts do, including examples of district tools such as rubrics, action plan templates, newsletters, and committee structures.

This intensive study of the award-winning districts complements an earlier study of award-winning schools, *Teachers Who Learn, Kids Who Achieve* (WestEd, 2000), and a toolkit developed by NCREL and McREL, *Professional Development: Learning from the Best,* which provides many useful templates for action planning

and vignettes about these schools and districts. A video, *Principles in Action,* showcases award-winning schools and districts in the McREL region. (These products can be ordered from the Web sites of the regional laboratories that developed them: www.WestEd.org, www.NCREL.org, and www.McREL.org.)

## The Award-Winning Districts

The National Awards Program for Model Professional Development (NAPMPD), established by the U.S Department of Education in 1996, honors both schools and districts that demonstrate the principles of high-quality professional development and impact on student learning.

Since the program began, 12 districts have been recognized. Nine districts were the subject of the 2001 study by the Regional Educational Laboratories reported here. The Center for Teaching Policy at the University of Washington included the other three in its larger research study, and information from these three districts was used to supplement the laboratory study. (See the Appendix for more information about the study design and methodology.)

As illustrated in Table 1, the districts range from small suburban districts to mid sized city districts, to the fifth-largest school district in the United States. Their circumstances vary, and the specific programs, labels, and personalities vary as well. But the study reveals strong underlying consistencies in their principles and approaches.

Each of these districts can demonstrate improvement in student learning. Some of the evidence is district-specific, directly linked to the focus of an initiative. If a district has concentrated on improving students' writing skills, as Lewisville did, for example, then increasing scores on district or state writing assessments are reported. Carroll School District responded to a gap in its students' performance in algebra relative to other areas, and tracked improvements on its end-of-course algebra exams. Regardless of district-specific gains, all the districts can point to improvements in student achievement scores on state or national standardized tests, including SAT/ACT scores. Broward, for example, had higher gains than the state average in the number of students scoring at level 2 and above on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test across six of nine comparisons (reading, writing, and math; elementary, middle, and high school from 1999 to 2000).

## Table 1. District Winners of the National Award for Model Professional Development

| District | State | Year of Award | Student Enrollment | Population Category | Ethnicity | English Learners | Free and Reduced Lunch | Special Needs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Broward** | **FL** | **2000** | **239,960** | **Urban** | **42.6% White**<br>**35.7% African American**<br>**17.5% Latino**<br>**2.7% Asian**<br>**0.3% American Indian or Alaska Native** | **28%** | **38%** | **11%** |
| Carroll | TX | 1999 | 5,850 | Suburban | 95.3% White<br>1.2% African American<br>2.0% Latino<br>1.3% Asian<br>0.2% American Indian or Alaska Native | 1% | 2% | 8% |
| **Lawrence** | **KS** | **1997** | **9,872** | **Midsized City** | **81.3% White**<br>**8.9% African American**<br>**2.5% Latino**<br>**3.1% Asian**<br>**4.0% American Indian or Alaska Native** | **3%** | **28%** | **20%** |
| Lewisville | TX | 1998 | 32,591 | Suburban | 82.4% White<br>5.4% African American<br>9.2% Latino<br>2.5% Asian<br>0.4% American Indian or Alaska Native | 11% | 10% | 13% |
| **Mountain Brook** | **AL** | **2000** | **3,898** | **Suburban** | **98.5% White**<br>**0.1% African American**<br>**0.4% Latino**<br>**0.1% Asian** | **<1%** | **0%** | **10%** |

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| District | State | Year of Award | Student Enrollment | Population Category | Ethnicity | English Learners | Free and Reduced Lunch | Special Needs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Norman** | **OK** | **1999** | **12,511** | **Suburban** | **81.4% White**<br>**6.0% African American**<br>**1.7% Latino**<br>**2.6% Asian**<br>**6.6% American Indian or Alaska Native** | **3%** | **24%** | **13%** |
| Olathe | KS | 1999 | 19,613 | Suburban | 88.5% White<br>4.6% African American<br>2.9% Latino<br>2.7% Asian<br>0.5% American Indian or Alaska Native | 1% | 10% | 13% |
| **Wichita** | **KS** | **2000** | **48,547** | **Urban** | **54.0% White**<br>**23.4% African American**<br>**14.7% Latino**<br>**5.6% Asian**<br>**2.3% American Indian or Alaska Native** | **8%** | **50%** | **16%** |
| Wilton | CT | 1997 | 3,100 | Suburban | 94% White<br>1% African American<br>1% Latino<br>3% Asian | 0% | 1% | 13% |

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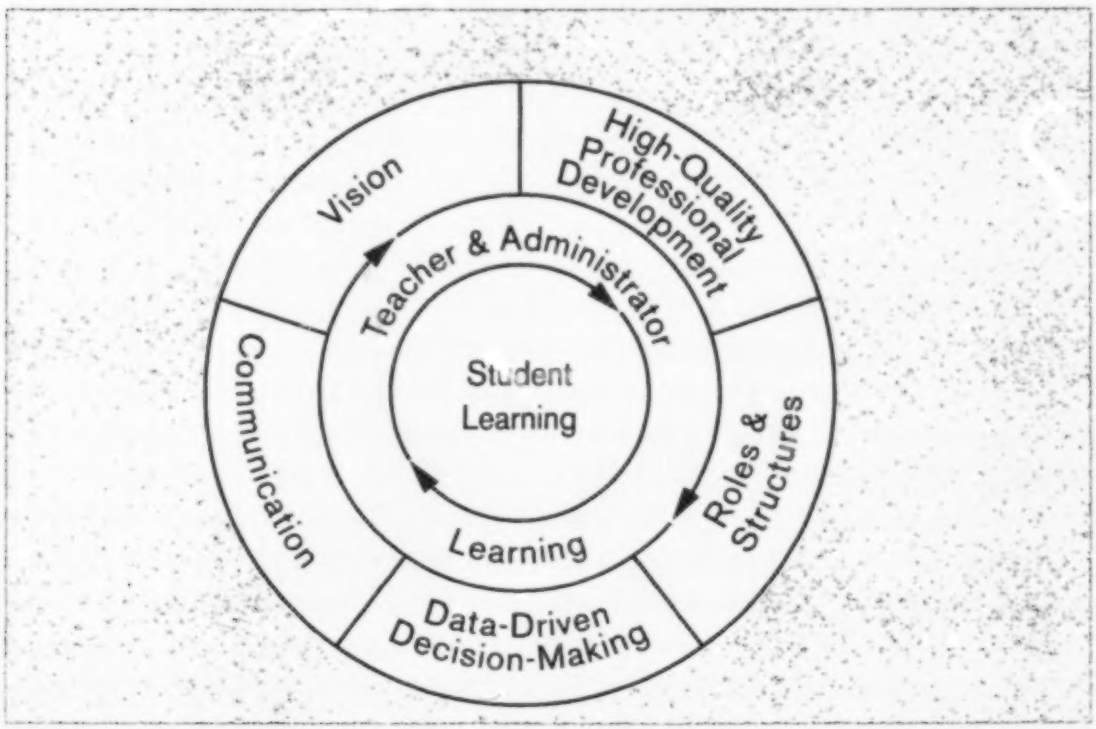
## A Systemic Approach

Looking across the nine districts, the most striking finding is the thoroughness and comprehensiveness of their efforts. They have a variety of effective professional development practices to be sure — for both teachers and administrators — but these are integrally connected to a larger set of elements in a well-functioning system. The greatest power seems to lie in the coherence of the whole. Planning occurs at the district, school, and individual levels, and is coordinated and reinforcing. Executive leadership is strong, school board policies are supportive, and distributed leadership permeates the districts. A focus on student learning guides decisions, and multiple channels of communication reach all audiences. In sum, the various parts of the system within these districts operate with coordination and consistency, to support learning for all, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Elements of the System to Support Learning**



## Change Over Time

While the above description may suggest well-oiled machines, humming along in high gear, a second striking observation is the time it has taken these districts to get where they are. The story of these districts' success is one of progress over time. Anywhere from five to fifteen years ago, they dug in to redesign the way business would be conducted. They studied research on teaching, learning, and the change process. They established new policies and practices that led to yet others. Many have developed rubrics that describe stages of development for teacher growth and organizational functioning. They have become better over time at selective abandonment — keeping what works and discarding what doesn't. The time it has taken them to warm up has also been a time to incorporate continuous improvement as a way of life.

A main message to others who want to make similar shifts is "hang in there." Understanding the change process as they did, key leaders in these districts both planned for the hard times and persevered through them. See Spotlight 1 for comments from the Broward County district's leadership team about the importance of allowing time for the benefits of change to be felt.

## Technical Design, Cultural Transformation

As these districts improve over time, they are attentive to both technical and cultural concerns. They work on the core elements of the education system — curriculum, assessments, instructional strategies, schedules, processes, job descriptions, etc. — and they keep looking for better ways to do these things. They invest in building the capacity of their human resources, not just finding the right way to do something. And because they understand that in human systems, the beliefs and feelings of the people involved are critically important, they design professional development that recognizes and attends to the change process, respects diversity, and aims to create a caring community that can energize people to work together for the good of students.

**Spotlight 1. Accepting Change,**
**Broward County Public School District**

Members of the leadership team in the Broward County district describe a three-year period before teachers were comfortable with a key strategy in their district improvement plan, the Professional Growth Plan (PGP).

"If there is one thing in the past five years that has made a substantial difference in the attitude toward staff development across the board [in a district with 12,000-13,000 teachers], it is the PGP. You are looking at a lot of people who are now sold because of the direct link from them personally to the staff development. Teachers determine the two things they are going to focus on. Achieving their plan is directly linked with the staff development they select.

"To be honest with you, the first year this came out I was a principal and none of us wanted to do it. It was just extra stuff. The end of that year we looked at what our teachers had been engaged in and what had happened as a result. It was marvelous data. When we sat down with the teachers, we saw differences. We saw impact on attitude and behavior and impact on what they were doing in the classroom. The first year was coercion, but after seeing the changes we became believers. The second year we were more comfortable with the PGP, we knew better how to use it. We looked at clusters of concerns within schools and how to address the concerns in-house. It took about three years for the teacher union to feel comfortable with the PGP.

"You can't just throw it at people. You have to provide that groundwork – it is key. You also want to hang on after that first year. Don't give up!" *(Broward leadership team)*

The Broward district was able to hold onto its goal is to keep improving, to see not just individual skill development but organizational learning as the norm.

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The relationship between technical and cultural concerns is not unlike Mark Twain's understanding of the relationship between words and music. When his quite proper wife attempted to shock Twain out of his liberal use of profanities, letting loose a string of them herself, he turned to her and noted, "Woman, you've got the words but you sure ain't got the tune." Similarly, these districts don't just haul out the words; by investing their actions with concern for students and respect for their staffs, they also provide the tune.

## Interlocking System Elements

While there are many ways to analyze the components of an education system, we have derived five key elements that characterize these districts and are also corroborated in other research. Table 2 shows how technical and cultural considerations were manifested in each of the five elements. The explication of those elements constitutes the remainder of this report.

## Table 2. Technical and Cultural Considerations in Five Key System Elements

| Key System Elements | Technical/Structural Considerations | Cultural/Personal Considerations |
|---|---|---|
| **High-Quality Professional Development** | Professional development processes are carefully designed and follow explicit standards of quality.<br>Implementation stages are explicitly articulated in designs and rubrics. | Everyone is involved; flexibility and choice are provided; content is relevant to immediate needs; balance exists across district, school, and individual levels.<br>People are accepted where they are and moved forward. |
| **Vision** | Focus is on all students and guides design of the system.<br>A comprehensive framework identifies the components of the system that support learning. | Focus is on all students; moral/purpose is to serve all students, meet their needs.<br>The framework serves as a road map for staff. |
| **Communication** | Regular channels of communication are established (e.g., newsletters, memos, policies, presentations to all audiences).<br>New initiatives are communicated carefully and thoroughly.<br>Communication covers "what" is happening. | Symbols, slogans, and events are used to build community.<br>Communication is a two-way street; people have input, give feedback.<br>Communication covers "why" something is happening, explicates the link to students. |
| **Roles and Structures** | Specific leadership roles are created at district and school levels to support professional development.<br>Committees across multiple role groups are responsible for planning and management. External partnerships are formed.<br>Collaboration time is provided. | Leadership opportunities create avenues for advancement; internal expertise is honored.<br>Interaction fosters understanding and interpersonal connections.<br>Communities of learners are established. |
| **Data-Driven Decision-Making** | Planning is explicitly based on needs of students and teachers; standards and assessments are clear and detailed.<br>Individuals are held accountable; growth plans are part of staff evaluation.<br>Evaluation of programs and activities looks at implementation and effectiveness, guides next round of decisions. | Multiple forms of data are used; planning occurs at multiple levels; self-assessment builds reflection.<br>The expectation that everyone is a learner becomes part of the culture; accountability is shared.<br>Evaluation anchors the cycle of continuous improvement, supports the shift from going in circles to spiraling upward. |

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# High-Quality Professional Development

Professional development in the nine districts studied is much more than a series of workshops. Indeed, these districts are leaders in reconceptualizing what is meant by professional development.

Another group of high-performing school districts, Texas districts that succeeded in getting at least one third of their high-poverty schools to achieve at levels higher than 60 percent of the schools in the state, was also found to emphasize a newer, broader concept of what supports learning:

> This new conceptualization of professional development required that teachers be provided many opportunities to meet together to analyze data, to plan, to examine and adjust the curriculum, to reflect upon their own instructional practices, and to examine and discuss student work. Professional development was pursued daily as teachers sought to learn from their own practice; it was no longer a commodity delivered a few times a year as something separate from the act of teaching students. *(Ragland et al., 1999, pp. 21–22)*

Research is beginning to corroborate the effectiveness of this kind of professional development. A major study of the Eisenhower Professional Development Program (Porter et al., 2000) found that "reform type professional development (e.g., teacher network or study group) was more effective than a traditional workshop or conference format." According to the study, more effective professional development also "provides opportunities for active learning; is coherent or consistent with teachers' goals and other activities; and involves the participation of teachers from the same subject, grade or school."

The NAPMPD winners have studied research on best practices. Several worked with the National Staff Development Council and adapted their standards for

high-quality professional development. They have evolved a growing range of practices that includes workshops and university courses, but also Web-based discussion groups, CD-ROMs to guide individualized study, and support for action research. Broward, for example, includes the following options on teachers' professional development applications: update, interactive presentation, staff development workshop, study group, learning community, independent study, or on-line course.

Whatever the form, successful districts build in time for collaboration, reflection, and evaluation. The experiences and practices of the NAPMPD winners in making the shift to more effective professional development, like the experiences of the Texas districts and the NAPMPD award-winning schools, point to the establishment of a "culture of learning," where everyday actions, from individual planning to team meetings, further the agenda of improving practice within a comprehensive framework.

Among the specific themes that emerged around the forms of professional development in the award-winning districts, application, differentiation, and a school-based inquiry approach were most salient.

## Application

In no case do these districts define professional development as "sit and git." Regardless of the structure of the initial input, from workshop to study group, teachers are expected to apply in their classrooms what they are learning. These districts have uniformly concluded that "workshops without follow-up are worthless" and expect all staff development to include follow-through, application, and on-site support. Olathe reminds teachers of the research showing that 20–25 trials over 8–10 weeks are needed to effectively implement new learning. Only when teachers actually master new practices can student learning be affected.

These districts recognize that they have a responsibility to support their teachers to apply new learning. They provide coaching and on-site assistance through a variety of staffing arrangements both within and across schools. (See the section "Roles and Structures" for further information.)

In Broward County, a significant step in their redesign process has been to require teachers to build follow-up into their professional development plan if they are to receive credit for it. This systemic component of the plan enables teachers to use any new instructional strategy in the classroom and evaluate its impact on student learning. It also gives teachers the opportunity to identify additional needs, which may be used to design future staff development activities.

## Differentiation

Based on their understanding of adult learning, these districts design professional development systems that include an array of offerings to meet different needs, reportedly becoming more differentiated in their offerings over time. Some have developed offerings explicitly targeted to different levels of knowledge and skill. Wichita, for example, uses a developmental continuum of awareness, demonstration, integration, and transfer. Rubrics help teachers determine which level they are at, and expectations for what teachers will learn and apply are matched to these levels.

A second reason for differentiation is to allow educators individual choice in how they learn. The award-winning districts, like the ten Texas high-performing districts, "negotiate a careful balance between flexibility and accountability" (Ragland et al., 1999). They use the other elements of the system — vision, communication, roles/structures, and data-driven decision-making — to bring people together in an understanding of what they need to work on to improve student achievement, but they leave room for teachers to decide how best to support their own learning. Teachers in these districts can choose among different methods and options, so long as they can relate these to shared goals.

Because everyone in the system is evaluating the effectiveness of his or her efforts, everyone shares the same motivation: to find and use what works. Differentiation and choice acknowledge that what works may vary by context. Teachers and site team members in Wichita and Norman appreciate the new opportunities for growth that their districts are providing them:

> "We used to have to go see a motivational speaker, now we have choices with real meaning." *(Wichita teacher)*

> "The district is leading the way, but they are listening to teachers. It used to be, 'What are they going to do to us?' Now it's, 'What can they do for us?'" *(Norman site team member)*

## School-Based Inquiry Approach

There is increasing emphasis on school-based, inquiry methods. Both of the preceding themes — application and differentiation — necessarily move the locus of professional development closer to the classroom. Because direct applied work, tied to a teacher's specific issues of practice, is both most relevant and most effective, that's what these districts increasingly support: workshops on site, model lessons, collaborative work time, coaching in teachers' classrooms, and inquiry methods such as study groups or action research.

> "Staff meetings are used as a venue for ongoing informal professional development. Collaborative teacher teams meet daily and the campus support teacher [CST] meets with them and provides any necessary training. CST will ask teachers to present strategies and problems to each other in 10–15-minute segments at staff meetings, and usually there is time for discussion after the presentation." *(Wichita principal)*

"Our school has had a reading emphasis and some of our teachers have been involved in the Literacy First reading program. We have been able to try activities in our own classrooms and have discovered that the reading activities carry over into science and social studies. We will be taking the summer to do more work on comprehension. Then during the school year we will share our information twice a week in meetings with four or five teachers."
*(Norman professional development teacher cadre specialist)*

School-based inquiry is often augmented with opportunities for teachers to pursue individual professional development interests. (See Spotlight 2 for an example of collaborative work and individualized professional development featuring on-line courses.)

## Professional Development for Administrators

Teachers are not the only ones who engage in professional development in these districts; so do administrators. Leadership at school sites is critical to success, as elaborated in the section "Roles and Structures." Leadership development is therefore attended to explicitly. The same principles that shape the character of professional development for teachers also determine the form of offerings for administrators: learning is ongoing, collaborative, and focused on immediate issues of practice. A typical example is the Principals' Academy in Wichita, where principals meet together over a two-year period in a peer support group. They also learn specific skills, such as how to collect and use data to guide planning, that are applicable at their school sites. They practice these skills in their own action research projects carried out as part of the academy process.

**Spotlight 2. Collaborative and Individualized Professional Learning, Lewisville Independent School District**

Professional development in Lewisville high schools mixes school-based collaborative learning and individualization. At Colony High School, for example, over 60 percent of the staff have completed one or more on-line courses through the National Association of Secondary School Principals. These interactive courses, which teachers select and complete individually, include assessments to validate learning. On the collaborative side, many Colony departments meet at least weekly to plan lessons or units together and coordinate responsibilities. This collaboration allows for flexibility within the curriculum unit and provides consistency for learning objectives and outcomes. The learning community at this high school is both individualized and collaborative.



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# Vision

As crucial as high-quality professional development is to their success, the vision that drives these school districts begins with a clear focus on student learning and spreads to an articulated understanding of a comprehensive model or framework for how student learning is achieved.

## Focus on Students

"Success for all, and all means all." These words have guided educators in Wichita, Kansas, for the past eight years. They represent the beliefs of the former superintendent that all students can learn, that benchmarks are necessary, that it is important to identify achievement gaps, and that those gaps have to be narrowed while keeping expectations high for all. As the district demographics have become increasingly diverse, the current superintendent has continued to make decisions based on this vision. It has been woven into the fabric of the entire district. It is displayed throughout the district and is shared by teachers, union representatives, administrators, central office staff, board members, support staff, and parents who were interviewed for this report.

Not just Wichita, but all these districts have a clear focus on students. Their purpose for being, expressed in mission statements, slogans, and symbols, is to ensure that all children learn and thrive. In Olathe, for example, the goal is "students prepared for their future." Lewisville has a "commitment to excellence."

## Comprehensive Framework

The vision doesn't stop with outcomes; it includes each district's model for how to reach those outcomes, especially the vital link between teacher learning and student learning. The critical understanding that teaching practice must change, and the emphasis on making it happen, are distinctive of these districts and vital to

their success. David and Shields (2001), for example, in their study of a few reform districts, found that the typical mental model in standards-based reform — standards lead to expectations lead through professional development to improved practice — seriously underrepresented the importance of an early direct focus on instructional practice. Frameworks in the award-winning districts make it clear that *everyone* needs to be learning. In Broward County, for example, the following "conceptual framework for student achievement" is used repeatedly:

| Culture + Results-Driven Staff Development → Teacher Effectiveness → Student Achievement |
|---|

Broward also lays out the characteristics of an effective adult learning environment in a rubric that includes such culture components as collaboration, change, time, and opportunity; it also includes the features of the Results-Driven Staff Development Model, such as needs assessment, follow-up and feedback, and performance evaluation. The rubric also incorporates three stages in the change process — foundation, application, and accomplished. Altogether, the rubric provides an especially complete picture of what the district is trying to accomplish.

A deep understanding of the change process is reflected in the frameworks of all the districts. They see that supporting teacher learning and school improvement is a matter of helping people change, with all the accompanying uncertainty, resistance, and confusion. They draw on the research literature on the change process to find strategies and language for dealing with change explicitly.

The Norman district attends to the change process in adult learning by providing district professional development in the Concerns Based Adoption Model (CBAM). In Norman, this approach has resulted in a district culture conducive to change. (See Hall & Hord, 2001, for the latest presentation of CBAM research.)

Lawrence is another district that has been successful by incorporating research on the change process into its professional development. As at Norman, CBAM has been influential in the design of district professional development. (See Spotlight 3 for comments from a Lawrence administrator about the district's conscious attention to the change process.)

### Spotlight 3. Honoring the Change Program, Lawrence School District

Paying attention to the change process is a high priority in the Lawrence district, where both change literature and change models inform professional development efforts.

"You cannot overlook the change process. Teachers move along developmentally and they are all over the place, just like a classroom of kids. You have to look at the reasons why people resist and not assume it is for bad reasons. You need to think, 'OK, what can we put in place to support these people?' It is really at a very conscious level that you are making decisions about what you are asking people to do, talking to them about why you're asking them to do it, having that rationale in place, and having them be involved all along the way.

"So you really do consider a change model such as CBAM. That model has been around forever, but paying attention to it is hard work. Just that whole consideration for change and dealing with adult learners. There's a body of literature about change that people take for granted, but if you don't move it into your practice and how you do things, you *will* fail." *(Lawrence administrator)*

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## Standards

A critical part of the comprehensive vision developed in each of these districts is a clear articulation of standards. These districts have developed and/or adopted standards — often not only for students, but for teachers, leaders, and professional development processes as well:

> "We would say to other districts that are just starting out, go that extra step past developing grade-level standards and benchmarks and identify what the teacher needs. That is going to tell you what types of staff development are needed." *(Broward leadership team member)*

In these districts, people diligently backward map from student standards to the teacher knowledge and skills needed to teach students to those standards and then design professional development that will promote the necessary teacher learning. They select standards to focus on by looking at gaps in student learning and then set goals for improvement (discussed in the section "Data-Driven Decision-Making"). This kind of targeted professional development requires planning at multiple levels, but the result is professional development that specifically meets district standards and addresses student needs.

Several of the districts incorporated the standards for professional development advocated by the National Staff Development Council (NSDC), which are divided into three categories: context, process, and content. Guides for setting professional development standards are available on the NSDC Web site (www.nsdc.org) and in a New American Schools guide for districts (Haslam & Seremet, 2001).

# Communication

A striking feature of all of these districts is the amount and thoroughness of the communication that takes place. Communication in these districts is highly valued and carefully planned. The planning focuses on both what is to be communicated, and the beliefs and feelings of the various audiences being addressed.

## Communicating the Vision

Having a vision articulated by leadership or developed in strategic planning is not worth much unless it is shared throughout the district. Communication is essential to get everyone on the same page so that everyone can understand and use a common language. For example, an emphasis on communication emerged in a recent study of schools engaged in comprehensive reform (Taylor, 2000), and an in-depth analysis of forms of communication in five school districts (Corbett & Wilson, 1991) noted the role of communication in distributing knowledge throughout a district.

After the Broward district put together its new vision and model for staff development, they developed a districtwide communication plan. Included in the plan was the development of a program handbook and video to standardize the presentation of information about the new program. A network of individuals was trained to "roll out" the key pieces: the Results-driven Staff Development Model, Essential Teacher Knowledge concepts, and the Critical Content concepts. These people went to each of the 209 schools in the district to develop an awareness among staff of the new vision and concepts and the changes that were going to be taking place. The effectiveness of the roll-out plan and follow-up are evident in the consistency of the message articulated by everyone interviewed during the study.

Events that bring people together and reinforce the sense of community around the vision are common. In Mountain Brook, for example, the first day back in the fall every teacher, support staff person, and administrator gathers for

"Institute Day." The day is planned by the teachers and includes a variety of presentations focused on the vision. The Norman district begins each year with a staff retreat that unveils a theme for the year and concludes with its annual "celebration of teaching."

One key role for superintendents and other district leaders is communicating the vision across the district:

> "Our superintendent has been able to articulate the vision. You need someone to articulate the vision and get everyone excited about what the outcome might be. Then people will start to say, 'How can we get there?'" *(Mountain Brook parent)*

Superintendents in these districts maintain high visibility in their communities — to keep the vision alive. The Carroll superintendent sees it as his responsibility to "market" the District Improvement Plan so that it permeates the thinking of the school board and the entire community.

## Regular Channels of Communication

The need for communication is infinite and the shelf life of a particular communiqué is very short. Typically, these districts reach their communities frequently and through a variety of media. Superintendents take the lead, talking with the community on a regular basis to garner support for professional development as a way to realize the changes needed to improve student achievement. Newsletters from buildings to their constituents and from the district to the whole community, articles about professional development in the local paper, discussion of professional development at board meetings that are broadcast on the cable TV station, orientation sessions, PowerPoint presentations, district brochures and flyers, professional development catalogs, school newsletters, district Web sites that describe the foundation for the professional development model and the changes taking place, and comments from teachers and principals

to students provide a number of other regular communication channels. In Lewisville, the assistant superintendent sends out a daily e-mail with information about staff and student successes. In Wichita and Broward, communication is in Spanish as well as English.

No matter how districts transmit their messages, the content always focuses on two things: what is happening and why. In describing their journey, it has been important for these districts to share their current location in the context of where they have been, what they have accomplished, and how far they have to go. Other important messages help the community to understand that teachers have the role of being lifelong learners. In Olathe, many principals highlight professional development activities in their newsletters. They identify the activity, what the teachers are learning, and how this will have an impact in the classroom. In addition, most Olathe principals make it part of their announcements to students: "On Friday we won't have school because teachers will be in training. They're going to learn how to...."

Olathe teachers, too, communicate with students about professional development. They understand that what students say to their parents about why a teacher is out of the classroom or why there was an early dismissal can have a strong impact on parental perceptions:

> "We build in a component with our students. When we have staff development days during the school year, we never act like it's a day off school for us. I always joke with them, 'Well, they're going to finally teach me how to do my job. Aren't you guys glad?' They'll come in after I've been gone and say, 'OK, what new thing did you learn?'" *(Olathe teacher)*

> "We don't want parents just to notice that a child is at home. We are careful how we talk about professional development so parents know that the teachers are getting training so that this can be a

better experience for their children." *(Olathe professional development committee member)*

This kind of careful communication has made a big difference in parental and community attitudes about professional development in Olathe and other award-winning districts.

## Two-Way Communication Loops

Communication is not just from the leadership outward. All the districts use a series of feedback loops and other mechanisms to involve staff and stakeholders in providing input and participating in dialogue that contribute to decisions.

In Wilton, one such critical loop is through the district staff development committee. Since the committee is representative of all schools, grade levels, and disciplines in the district, it is a natural vehicle for two-way sharing — of information from the district and of issues the represented groups may have. For instance, when new state mandates related to staff development and the mini grant process were announced, committee members were an important back-and-forth conduit of information. According to Wilton staff, this committee is probably the most effective structure they have established to provide input into the professional development program. Staff feel they have a voice in the program and that their needs are being met as a result of the work of this committee.

Olathe attributes the open articulation within and among all levels of the organization in large part to the district Covey training *(Seven Habits of Highly Effective People)*. Ten years ago when the program was introduced, all staff in the district — administrators, teachers, classified, and support — were trained. Training continues to be provided for any staff new to the district. Benefits to the district go beyond personal growth; a common language in support of common values is widespread in the district. During an interview with the Olathe Professional Council, the council identified a strong collaborative approach in the district and a

value that time be taken to talk about people's different ideas. By the time the process is complete, there is buy-in and ownership, and everyone understands the "why" behind decisions and actions. An attitude has been established of "let's all understand together, get on board together, and try to accomplish the goal."

Over the last few years, the Lawrence district has made specific efforts to improve communication. Technology has also played an important role in increasing communication in the district. By making it easier to get information out to and back from people, technology has made it easier for teachers to provide input to the planning committees. Technology has also provided another way for teachers to interact around issues of teaching and learning. For example, after attending a session on instructional strategies for reading, teachers can participate in an on-line discussion of what they learned, any questions they have, and how they are using the information.

The superintendents in these districts make a special effort to listen to and talk with staff. The Lawrence superintendent invites a group of teachers to dinner once a month to talk about their needs. In Wilton, "Let's Talk" meetings are scheduled twice a year in each content area. See Spotlight 4 for comments from the Wilton superintendent about district communication that is both informal and focused.

In all districts, parents and community members are included in two-way communication. In Norman the result feels like a mobilization of the whole community on behalf of kids:

> "At the Norman Public School Foundation breakfast this morning, it was apparent that the stakeholders are everyone in Norman. 'Children are our future' is something this town takes very seriously, and the endowment of the foundation, which is now over a million dollars, reflects that commitment. Day-to-day communication about our schools, staff, and teachers is at a high level across the entire town. We have strong community input through a variety of site- and

district-level councils. Our citizens' advisory council is made up of a parent representative from every site, two selected by the board, and several business representatives. The group responds to issues identified by the school board, and decisions are not made until the board feels everyone has had their say. The difference is that we listen." *(Norman school board member)*

**Spotlight 4. Focused, Informal Communication, Wilton School District**

In Wilton, "Let's Talk" is a feature of the district's communication structure. Twice a year teachers, principals, and instructional leaders come together to focus on particular issues in each content area. The Wilton superintendent believes these conversations not only improve instruction, but help to maintain a collaborative ethos across the district:

> "Sometimes you can resolve things most expeditiously through informal ways, and so we talk about math or science and what's working or not working, and everyone gets to say what's needed. Since our profession is collaborative, not competitive, as long as we honor a collaborative ethos, we'll all help each other, and if teachers are successful, kids will be successful." *(Wilton superintendent)*



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# Roles and Structures

Communication about and implementation of programs and procedures are facilitated in these districts by their organizational design — the roles that are defined, the committees that are created, and the schedules that are adopted. These districts develop new, specialized roles and also build the capacity of those in traditional roles and structures to support more effective functioning.

## Distributed Leadership

Those normally thought of as leaders — district and site administrators — were cited as critical to vision and momentum in each of the nine districts, as in other studies of high-performing districts in North Carolina (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2000) and Texas (Skrla et al., 2000). In addition, the NAPMPD districts were notable for their expansive view of leadership — one that included developing teacher leadership, establishing new roles, and distributing leadership throughout the district, both formally and informally. And they deliberately sought to develop leadership capacity.

One clear benefit of distributed leadership is to increase resilience in the face of personnel changes. In Lawrence, for example, having professional development embedded in every staff position has served the district well through three superintendents in the five years since it won the award. District staff along with principals and teacher leaders could carry on key beliefs and practices. Professional development appeared to be so embedded in building-level culture that buildings could continue this focus while the district office was in transition.

In all these districts, three types of leaders defined in the research literature were clearly identifiable. The types are summarized in Table 3 and discussed below.

**Table 3. Three Types of Leaders**

| Typical Positions | Characteristics | Functions | Impact |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Executive Leaders** | | | |
| Superintendents, Assistant Superintendents, Directors, Central Office Staff | "One step removed from the organization's direct value-producing activities." (Senge et al., 1999, p. 18) | Maintain "a balcony view." Create a learning organization. Push decisions to the level of impact. Model the leadership behavior expected of others in the organization. | Necessary for profound change. |
| **Local Line Leaders (Site Administrators)** | | | |
| Principals, Assistant Principals | Accountable "for results and [given] sufficient authority to undertake changes in the way that work is organized and conducted at their local level." (Senge et al., 1999, p. 16) | Provide the leadership to ensure implementations, procedures, and norms that produce results aligned with the district vision, policies, goals, and action plan. (Teachers function as leaders in their classrooms.) (Vojtek & Vojtek, 1999) | Vital for implementing systemic change and testing impact of new ideas and approaches. |
| **Teacher Leaders** | | | |
| Building and Zone-Level Coordinators, Teachers on Special Assignment, Building-Based Members of District-Level Committees, Department Chairs | Internal network leaders within their peer group. Able to move beyond their own realms to gain access to new and innovative ideas. (Vojtek & Vojtek, 1999) | Diffuse innovations, act as "seed carriers" of new ideas and practices. Maintain communication links within the organization. Act as support providers. | Able to create better results within their units and enhance systemwide communication. |

***Executive leaders*** (superintendents, board members, central office staff) in these districts have adopted a *stewardship* style of leadership. Key to this approach is to provide support and to truly empower:

> *Stewardship* is a way to use power to serve through the practice of partnership and empowerment. This is the alternative to the conventional notions of *strong leadership* for implementing changes. The intent is to redesign our organizations so that service is the centerpiece and ownership and responsibility are



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> strongly felt among those close to doing the work and contacting customers. *(Block, 1996, p. 63)*

Executive leaders in these districts embody Senge's view of their purpose: "The real role of executive leadership is not in 'driving people to change' but in creating organizational environments that inspire, support and leverage the imagination and initiative that exists at all levels" (Senge et al., 1999, p. 566). See Table 4 for a list of what executive leaders in these districts *do*. It varies slightly depending on their particular role.

Central to the success of executive leaders is their ability to scan the system and identify patterns. This is sometimes referred to as taking a "balcony view" (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997):

> Without the capacity to move back and forth between the field of action and the balcony, to reflect day to day, moment to moment, on the many ways in which an organization's habits can sabotage adaptive work, a leader easily and unwittingly becomes a prisoner of the system. The dynamics of adaptive change are far too complex to keep track of, let alone influence, if leaders stay only on the field of play. *(pp. 125–126)*

While key district administrators engage in strategic analysis and guide the actions of the system, moving between the field and the balcony, the school boards in these districts concentrate on the big picture. The boards in these districts are very clear that their role is not to micromanage, but to set goals, expectations, and a tone for improvement and to review progress:

> "The board has identified certain things we think are important to have a world-class school system, and we try to give support and overall guidance to that but don't get involved in the day-to-day activities. Setting the tone of an expectation level is something we can do and

## Table 4. What Executive Leaders *Do*

### Superintendents

- Set clear role expectations and responsibilities.
- Have and communicate a vision.
- Have a systemic professional development plan with each level linked to the others.
- Have a professional development philosophy based on knowledge of research and best practice.
- Collect perceptions of stakeholders.
- Ensure that research on best practice (professional development, content, and pedagogy) is gathered and shared.
- Ensure that improvement plans are written and based on best practice and analysis of student data.
- Know why a particular action is being taken (or considered) and proactively communicate that rationale to all stakeholders.
- Support at-risk schools at an increased level of resources.
- Establish/support foundations/partnerships that raise money.
- Approve incentives for engaging in professional development that positively impacts student achievement.
- The network includes feedback loops that are used to shape district practice.
- Function as a change agent; pace the change.
- Create, use, and nurture a *communication network* that encompasses teachers, parents, support staff, administrators, business, etc. and communicates both information and rationale.
- Believe in lifelong learning.
- Model being a lifelong learner.
- Establish and maintain learning communities at all levels in the district.
- Develop leadership at all levels of the organization.
- Embed data analysis in decision-making.
- Spend time in schools.
- Maintain a balcony view of the district.

### Board Members

- Set policies.
- Endorse professional development plan.
- Adequately fund professional development.
- Send message of continuous improvement.
- Use data to make decisions.
- Communicate support for professional development.
- Celebrate progress.
- Participate in professional development.
- Require a plan to monitor.
- Do NOT micromanage.
- Help set goals.
- Align resources with needs.
- Communicate the vision.
- Maintain a balcony view of the district.

### Central Office Personnel

- Work in tandem with superintendent.
- Understand responsibilities and expectations.
- Bring in outside experts and develop internal expertise.
- Build competence in content and pedagogy.
- Operate on the principle that an expectation to change involves a commitment to support.
- Monitor expenditure of professional development dollars.
- Provide specific professional development for leaders.
- Provide professional development for all levels of the organization.
- Provide professional development in a variety of forms (e.g., distance learning, Web-based learning, independent studies, CD-ROMs, chat rooms, study groups).
- Understand change and pace the change.
- Anticipate the needs of constituents: be proactive vs. reactive.
- Conduct needs assessments.
- Communicate the vision.
- Provide the big picture.
- Look for common threads in needs and requests.
- Model participation in professional development and data-based decision-making.
- Spend time in schools.
- Use standards for quality professional development to evaluate professional development.
- Create coordinating councils with representatives from schools/zones to design and evaluate professional development.
- Celebrate progress.
- Offer professional development activities at different developmental levels.
- Screen professional development offerings for quality and alignment with needs.
- Use technology where appropriate.
- Prepare self-assessment tools.
- Engage in a systemwide communication network.
- Keep principals informed.
- Maintain a balcony view of the district.
- Provide opportunities for staff to assume leadership responsibilities.
- Provide coaching.
- Distribute incentives.
- Provide both professional development materials and experts to the building level.



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we do it. Setting a tone around continuous improvement for all adults in the district is important." *(Mountain Brook board member)*

While hands-off, board members in these districts remain informed and involved. They get regular reports of what is happening, engage in formal review of results, and frequently participate in district activities. They see that they, too, need to be continuous learners.

***Local line leaders*** (principals, assistant principals) play a key role in fostering effective change, supporting innovations, implementing district policies, developing leadership within the staff, striving to attain the vision, monitoring progress, and communicating with all stakeholders. See Table 5 for a fuller description of what local line leaders *do*.

**Table 5. What Local Line Leaders *Do***

| Principals and Assistant Principals | | |
|---|---|---|
| Work with central office on curriculum and staff development. | Observe in classrooms behaviors resulting from professional development (in those cases where teachers use a self-assessment rubric, observe using that rubric). | Provide input to district on what professional development is needed. |
| Engage in professional development. | Evaluate teachers. | Engage in school self-assessment. |
| Use data to monitor professional development plans. | Use staff meetings for staff development. | Network with peers. |
| Align building-level vision with district-level vision. | Actively engage in a learning community. | Participate in communication network. |
| Communicate vision. | Visit similar schools. | Share leadership roles in the building, and support staff engaged in these roles. |
| Pace the change. | Evaluate with teachers the effectiveness of professional development. | Find time for professional development. |
| Communicate with PTA and parents (explain what is happening and why in lay language). | Analyze data and any links between improved student achievement and professional development activities. | Manage professional development resources. |
| Create culture to support teacher learning. | Provide follow up for professional development activities. | Apply for professional development resources. |
| Learn about an innovation before the staff, then participate with them in related professional development. | | Collect perceptions of stakeholders. |
| | | Maintain a balcony view of the building. |

How do principals attain, maintain, and refine the skills required to carry out these expectations? Each of these nine districts provides targeted learning and networking opportunities:

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> "We have moved from the cliques of the past to a community of learners. Now we recognize the strengths of one another so we know whom to call on for support when we need it. We recognize diversity as a strength." *(Norman principal)*

Several of the districts established Principals' Academies. The Wichita academy, mentioned earlier, is a voluntary, two-year program that provides leadership training, action research opportunities, and peer support. Principals learn how to collect and use data, to identify issues and develop a plan, to assess the plan, and to be involved in book studies. They share what they have learned with their staff. The Wichita district plans to institute an academy to include leadership opportunities for other district employees as well.

Sometimes an academy is specifically designed for assistant principals. In the Carroll district, assistant principals meet for two hours every six weeks to discuss common concerns and areas of need. First-year principals come and talk about their experiences. In addition to academies, Carroll, like many of the districts, has formed learning groups. Elementary and intermediate principals meet twice a month with the director of staff and program development in a learning group so that they can better share ideas, learn from each other what is going on in each campus, build trusting relationships, and study effective/best practices as instructional leaders. Mentoring is also provided for new principals.

Consistent with the concept of stewardship, the districts respond to the needs of local line leaders. In Broward, every July the principals are asked what is needed to enhance learning at their schools. A request to learn how to establish learning communities and deliver professional development in their schools resulted in professional development on these topics being included in the principal meetings. Principals reported that these sessions have been very helpful.

All nine districts are committed to making sure that principals are successful. They recognize the principals as the leaders who initiate significant change and help it to take root ***within the organization***. In contrast to individual schools that

succeed because of a maverick or exceptional principal, the award-winning districts foster a *community of leaders*, designing district supports and ways for principals to help each other learn, both to maximize their success and to compensate for potential limitations in individual line leaders.

***Teacher leaders*** are cultivated in each of these districts — and are critical to distributing leadership throughout the district. See Table 6 for a list of what teacher leaders *do*.

In addition to providing technical information, such as how to develop curriculum and assessment, teacher leaders serve as internal network leaders, fostering and sustaining a culture of improvement. Teacher leaders are key in implementing change:

> Their strength is their ability to move about the larger organization, to participate in and nurture broad networks of alliances with other, like-minded individuals, and to help local line leaders, both by assisting directly and by putting them in contact with others who share their passions and from whom they can learn. *(Senge et al., 1999, p. 17)*

Lewisville exemplifies the sorts of teacher leader roles common in these districts. Its Mentor Teacher program enables teachers to develop leadership skills while assisting first-year teachers with their transition into the school district. Each elementary and middle school has one mentor teacher who receives a stipend and materials to meet with new teachers. In addition, as elementary teachers realized the need for increased on-site support in curriculum areas, the district created Project LEARN (Lewisville Elementary Advocate Resource Network). These LEARN advocates in math, science, social studies, and language arts receive training during the summer and meet with teachers over the school year in half-day release sessions. LEARN advocates also meet four or five times a year as a group, along with the high school department chairs, to align curriculum, ensure students have a smooth transition between levels, and share research.

### Table 6. What Teacher Leaders *Do*

| Teacher Leaders | | |
|---|---|---|
| Take responsibility for self-directed learning that is tied to student achievement. | Serve on state committees. | Participate in a variety of professional development activities (e.g., workshops, chat rooms, study groups, action research, long-distance learning). |
| Exert peer pressure/peer support to engage in improvement. | Foster and sustain a culture of improvement. | Engage in pre work before a staff development activity. |
| Are lifelong learners. | Engage in feedback loops; communicate how things are working. | Self-assess for content and pedagogy. |
| Make presentations. | Provide input to district goals. | Generate professional growth plans, then implement, monitor with principal, and adjust them. |
| Share informally with others. | Show how professional development requests are tied to goals. | Mentor/coach new teachers. |
| Understand district and building vision and communicate it to others. | Explain to students when and why they are attending professional development. | Operate a demonstration classroom. |
| Collectively examine student work. | Document what students have learned based on what teachers have been doing differently as a result of their professional development. | Maintain appropriate balcony view (e.g., if on a building committee, a building view; if on a district committee, a district view). |
| Are productive team/committee members at both building and district level. | | |

In Norman, the professional development director, superintendent, and assistant superintendent wanted to provide concrete support for teachers to use new learning and implement staff development practices in their classrooms so they instituted the PRO Cadre program. PRO Cadre teachers are experts in specific areas that impact student learning across all levels and in all content areas, such as student assessment and the integration of technology into the curriculum. The PRO teachers receive ongoing staff development and transfer this professional learning to school-site colleagues using demonstration teaching, collegial conversations, and presentations. The cadre is a credible and sustainable process for making changes in teacher performance and student achievement, and has helped institutionalize staff development throughout the district.

In Wichita, campus support teachers (CST) have been established at every level (elementary, middle, and high school). They work with four to five schools each, providing staff development, workshops, and support for teachers. The fact that they are peers contributes to their effectiveness, in the opinion of one CST:

> "There is an established relationship between the CST and teachers. We are their peers rather than experts. We share ideas, work with

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training of trainers, work with the team, and are always learning together." *(Wichita campus support teacher)*

Because the Broward district is large, with about 240,000 students, almost 13,000 full-time instructional staff, and 209 schools, it has designated a number of internal leadership positions, ranging from zone coaches to a "Teachers Guild." For details of the Broward teacher leadership roles, see Spotlight 5.

## Committees

Leadership is broadened and strengthened in these districts through committee structures that bring people together across role groups. As these committees meet to advise on program design, review data and set priorities, or oversee programs, they also develop a sense of community and promote two-way communication.

All nine districts have district-level professional development committees. Wichita's Staff Development Council, for example, comprises principals, assistant principals, teachers, and classified staff. It develops district plans for school board approval and oversees their implementation. Carroll's committee includes both new and veteran teachers, as well as curriculum coordinators and administrators. All nine districts also have site-level leadership structures: school improvement teams, staff development committees, and/or site councils.

Leadership responsibility is shared across levels in ways that are more often dynamic or interactive than either top-down or bottom-up. The data-driven planning processes described in the next section connect the levels, but each committee has a distinct role and responsibility within the whole.

In Olathe, for example, a well-established infrastructure (various administrative positions at the district level and committee structures such as the District Staff Development Council, Professional Council, Building Leadership Teams,

**Spotlight 5. Teacher Leadership Roles, Broward County Public School District**

Zone coaches have a key role in Broward County's professional development structure. These leaders are assigned to each of the district's feeder zones, to organize and facilitate professional development. The zone coaches are a liaison between the district and the schools. They design staff development and work with each school in their zone so that a school's professional development ties into its school improvement plan (SIP) and is driven by data that identify specific needs at the site. Zone coaches have brought focus to Broward professional development efforts:

> "We saw 200 sites doing their own thing. We did not see a tie into the SIP. There was no accountability link. Now the zone coaches can troubleshoot for us in the schools. They are our main communication link." *(Broward district-area superintendent)*

Teachers as Leaders is another program in the Broward leadership continuum. This program provides support and training to team leaders, grade-level chairs, department chairs, and school improvement chairs – teachers who are not necessarily seeking a position in administration but who play an important leadership role in the school system. In addition, a second teacher leadership program, Leadership Experience and Administrative Development (LEAD), also provides the district with trained cadres of potential administrators.

In addition, Broward has a relatively large number of teachers who are National Board certified (166 as of January 2002), and the district views Board certification as a career ladder for teachers that encourages them to remain in teaching and value the profession. There are monetary incentives for being Board certified and for mentoring other teachers. These folks have formed themselves into a Teachers Guild to take on leadership roles in professional development. Specifically, they support teachers who are candidates for Board certification, help teachers in low-performing schools, and have created a mentoring program for second-year teachers.



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Building Site Councils, Instructional Resource Teachers) with clearly defined roles and responsibilities provides multiple levels of support for teacher learning and opportunities for input and leadership. This infrastructure is typical and is captured in Spotlight 6, which shows the connection of each of these groups to the Building Staff Development Plan.

Olathe's Building Leadership Teams are a pivotal part of the infrastructure and fulfill a variety of roles, receive special training, and, in turn, provide training to their colleagues. They work in concert with the school site council but, together with the principal, have a more direct role in helping to guide the school staff in carrying out the school improvement plan.

The Professional Council includes the Olathe National Education Association (NEA) president, the superintendent, five members designated by the NEA president, and five designated by the superintendent. The council, which meets monthly, reports to professional staff through monthly meetings of the Olathe NEA building representatives, administrative staff meetings, the district staff newsletter, and the Personnel Policies and Professional Employee Agreement.

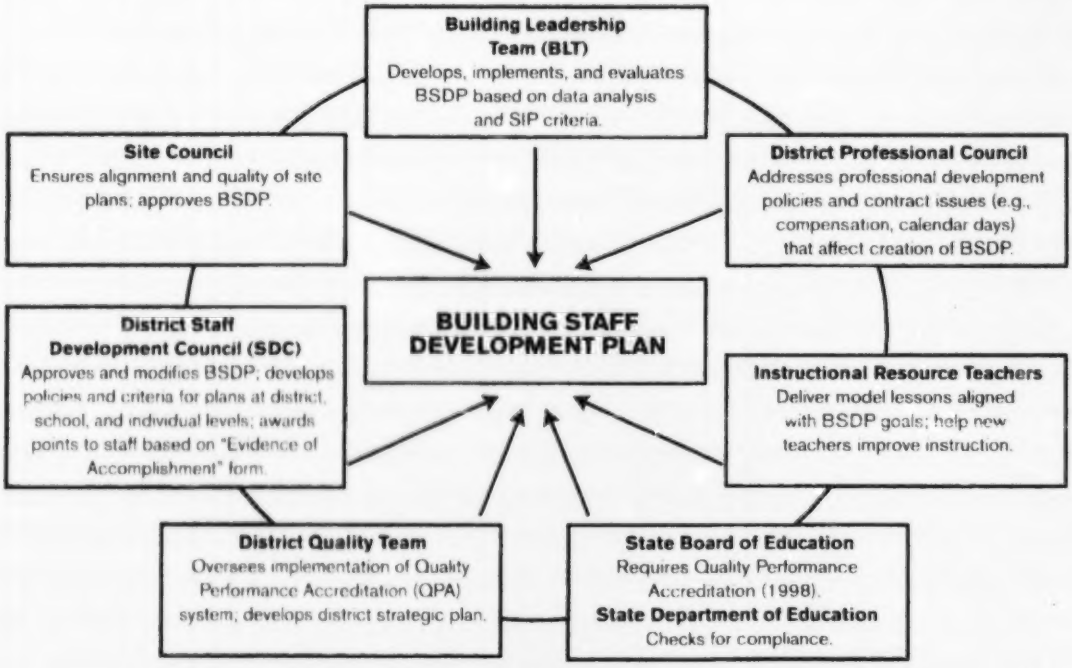
## External Partnerships

These districts also had formal partnerships with others outside the district. These included business partnerships, community foundations, partnerships with higher education, alliances with professional associations, regular contracts with local service providers, and formalized linkages with other districts.

External partnerships most directly relevant to professional development include linkages with higher education. Many of these districts have established agreements around preservice teacher preparation or advanced degree programs. Some have agreements with a specialized focus.

### Spotlight 6. The Building Staff Development Plan, Olathe Unified School District

A Building Staff Development Plan, or BSDP, is a five-year plan that is a part of Olathe's comprehensive school improvement process, or SIP. The purpose of the plan is for each building to strategize how to achieve the goals of the SIP through staff development. The BSDP for each site includes a mission statement, building profile, goals, an action plan, and professional development activities such as workshops and conferences. Olathe's various committees and teams all play specific roles in the plan's formation and implementation. The committees shown below represent the state, district, and building levels.


Building Leadership Team (BLT)
Develops, implements, and evaluates BSDP based on data analysis and SIP criteria.
Site Council
Ensures alignment and quality of site plans; approves BSDP.
District Professional Council
Addresses professional development policies and contract issues (e.g., compensation, calendar days) that affect creation of BSDP.
BUILDING STAFF DEVELOPMENT PLAN
District Staff Development Council (SDC)
Approves and modifies BSDP; develops policies and criteria for plans at district, school, and individual levels; awards points to staff based on "Evidence of Accomplishment" form.
Instructional Resource Teachers
Deliver model lessons aligned with BSDP goals; help new teachers improve instruction.
District Quality Team
Oversees implementation of Quality Performance Accreditation (QPA) system; develops district strategic plan.
State Board of Education
Requires Quality Performance Accreditation (1998).
State Department of Education
Checks for compliance.



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In Norman, for example, university faculty have collaborated with the district in providing long-term assistance to teachers focused on science content and curriculum, emphasizing what teachers need to learn and do to help students achieve.

Broward's Professional Pathways Policy specifies a higher education consortium to "improve communication and enhance relations between Broward's public school system, higher education, and auxiliary partners." The Broward County Educational Consortium includes a Policy Council comprising leadership from each of the agencies, other committees providing more direct management and oversight, and a set of subcommittees addressing specific issues. Within this structure, the district has arranged for targeted university courses to meet inservice needs; established professional development schools (including the pairing of urban and suburban schools); conducted a summit to develop a plan for recruiting, retaining, and training teachers; and developed alternative certification programs.

An innovative example of partnership among districts is the Tri-State Consortium, of which Wilton is a member. This consortium was formed in 1994 to bring more rigorous and systematic attention to student performance standards through a self-study and peer-review process. The consortium fields a visiting team to rate each district on five levels of performance in a chosen focus area, across three scoring rubrics — approach, implementation, and results. Based upon the report of the visiting team, the district develops an improvement plan. Wilton's superintendent, one of the cochairs of the Tri-State Consortium, says, "Our goal is to be critical friends...to help each other." He likens the team's assessment process to "peeling away the onion to its core." When an area of weakness is uncovered, the district scrutinizes the findings to determine exactly what students need. When subsequent interventions are implemented, the assessment model and process ensure that the district will be able to understand why and how any new results are achieved. The process has now become embedded at Wilton.

## Time

Time for professional learning is always a most precious commodity. With their expanded notion of professional development, these districts build in collaboration time and school-based planning time, in addition to time for more structured workshops — and make it all count. They work out arrangements for releasing teachers from the classroom for collaboration, to observe one another, or to engage in mentoring. In Lewisville, for example, half the staff, by grade level, take the whole student body so the other half of the teachers can attend professional development; the roles are then reversed. Some districts, like Wichita, set aside a substantial number of days for professional development and planning without students present. In Carroll, there are seven days for professional development and four for planning. Some create professional development time each week by lengthening the instructional day on four days, shortening the time spent on instruction on the fifth day, and using the remainder of the fifth day for professional development.

An innovative approach within Lawrence Public Schools is the use of "collaboration time" at the elementary and junior high schools. Each school has 90 minutes of collaboration time every Wednesday for addressing building and district goals. This time may be used for meetings with support staff, lesson modifications or adaptations, Quality Performance Accredition issues related to student learning, and assessment activities that directly impact student learning. When this collaboration time was first implemented, the high school staff wanted nothing to do with it. Seeing how it has improved the ability of staff in the other buildings to address issues for which there is no other time available, they are now interested in expanding collaboration time to the high schools as well. The approach used in Lawrence Public Schools, as part of the Master Agreement within the district, has the full support of the school board and the association.

Regular meeting time is used for professional development as well. In the Wilton district, for example, regular meetings during three months of the school year (October, January, March) are designated for professional development and follow-up to summer institutes.

# Data-Driven Decision-Making

Continuous improvement in these districts occurs through deliberate planning and evaluation processes anchored in data — and reflection on data. Data are analyzed to understand student needs and teacher needs in order to plan professional development at many levels. Following implementation of the various professional development plans, data are analyzed again, to evaluate the success of the strategies. Similar patterns of data-driven decision-making are seen in the Texas high-performing districts (Skrla et al., 2000) and those studied by Cawelti and Protheroe (2001), where the emphasis is on classroom assessment to inform instruction.

## Planning

One of the most striking things about each one of these districts was the detailed, ***multi-level planning*** that was in place. Districts set long-term goals and priorities. Each school developed school goals and plans for meeting them (sometimes involving additional planning at the department or team level within a school or for clusters of schools within a district). And each teacher developed an individual professional growth plan each year. Teachers were also involved in setting goals and developing plans at the team, school, and sometimes even district level. Specific forms, procedures, and requirements backed up and supported these planning processes.

The Carroll Staff Development Framework is an example of the multi-level planning that has at its core an expectation of learning for all adults in the district. See Spotlight 7 for details of the Carroll framework.

In most districts, the individual growth plan for each teacher was key. It was the connector between standards and individualization, between accountability and internal responsibility. Teachers were committed to the student focus and understood from the data the specific student learning needs to be met. It was then

**Spotlight 7. Staff Development Framework, Carroll Independent School District**

The Carroll staff development plan is a three-tiered, data-driven approach. The district-level development focuses on achieving district goals. It is long range. The campus-level development is a one- to three-year plan at the school or department level, aligned with the district plan but flexible to specific campus needs. The individual development plan is a one- to three-year formal/informal plan developed by every teacher, with administrator approval. There is a similar plan for administrators. Each tier is seen as essential to the overall quality of staff development and is aligned with the level above.

The district plan is implemented by the District Staff Development Advisory Committee. Two representatives from each campus serve on this committee for three years. Three administrator reps and the curriculum coordinators also serve on the district committee. The district staff development director chairs this committee, providing ongoing training to its members, who have become knowledgeable about quality staff development and deeply understand the connection between staff development and student learning.

The teacher liaisons act as resource people for developing the campus plan, monitoring campus staff development days, and collecting feedback from their campus in general and to help develop the needs-based district staff development day. They become staff development leaders within their building.

Finally, the forms for planning campus and individualized staff development are carefully designed to support the mission, design, and delivery of staff development. The campus-level form acts as a teaching tool by laying out the models of staff development, levels of program evaluation, and levels of use. Both forms are being revised to also include ways to evaluate a staff development opportunity relative to student learning.

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up to each of them to determine what they specifically needed to learn to do better by the students and how they would support their own professional growth to meet those goals. The districts' provision of flexibility and individual choice within this process were essential to full teacher commitment.

Another important feature in understanding not just the structure but also the culture of these districts is their emphasis on meaning-making and self-reflection. Planning is not a formulaic process: need plus solution equals plan. It is an active engagement of staff working together to understand needs and how to address them, to take on a challenge and seek changes in practice that will produce better outcomes. The quality of the engagement is seen as critical to stimulating real change.

Analysis of student data is paired with teacher reflection and self-assessment on related knowledge and skills. Broward has Essential Teacher Knowledge standards. Wichita makes extensive use of its knowledge-based self-assessment grid:

> "Four times a year every teacher in the district does a knowledge grid identifying levels of knowledge and use and application. Self-reflection is probably the most important part. It helps teachers plan their own staff development and makes them aware of what they have to learn." *(Wichita teacher)*

## Using Data to Guide Decisions

Actual data about students and teachers guide decisions at both ends of the improvement process in these districts — at the front end during needs assessment, and at the back end when results are evaluated. They look at a variety of student achievement measures, including district and state criterion-referenced tests and standardized achievement tests. They also use surveys and self-assessment by teachers, and sometimes surveys of parents and students as well. They have district staff who can help with data analysis, like Lawrence's school improvement specialist, and they train principals to understand how to make full use of the district data sets.

Educators in these districts cited a number of needs determined from data and addressed through professional development. Many of the examples were in core achievement areas, especially reading and math. See Spotlight 8 for an example from the Mountain Brook district.

**Spotlight 8. Data-Driven Professional Development, Mountain Brook City Schools**

In Mountain Brook, student test scores and teacher feedback revealed that reading skills in ninth grade were a major problem. Scores dropped at this level, and teachers reported that students had a hard time reading the textbooks. The district formed two subcommittees, one to look into whether instruction was being provided for the types of reading students were doing, and another to analyze test scores. They also consulted other school districts about their strategies in the face of similar issues. They concluded that students needed additional reading comprehension strategies, beginning with sixth grade. The next summer they brought in several local experts and a national expert to work with teachers at fifth grade and above on reading comprehension. The focus on reading extended across departments. In addition, support was provided to teachers through summer meetings, Engaging Teams, and monthly meetings during the school year.

As part of the process, the district surveyed current and recently graduated students about whether they thought they had the reading skills they needed. Following implementation of the district's improvement strategies, current students were surveyed again, to see whether their perceptions of reading and reading teachers had changed. Both the surveys and test scores were used to evaluate the professional development effort, and both indicated that improvements had been made.

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District use of data in their improvement cycles covered a range of topics and became common in the way these districts did business overall. See Spotlight 9 for examples from the Wichita district of far-ranging use of data.

**Spotlight 9. Far-Ranging Data Use, Wichita Unified School District**

Disaggregated reading scores led the Wichita district to institute a reading strategies notebook for middle schoolers and to have the campus support teachers develop modules on reading comprehension for elementary school teachers. When these strategies were implemented, scores improved.

Similarly, a campus support teacher analyzed data related to second- and fifth-grade benchmarks and saw that geometry was a high-need area at the school. As a result, geometry activities were offered schoolwide as well as at other schools. New lessons were introduced and modeled.

When another school found that its kindergarten and first-grade students liked school but those in second and third grade liked it less, the school got help from the district to bring in a specialist on improving student connectedness. A survey the following year assessed the success of the program.

In another school, a counselor issued parent surveys and used the data to help plan student support groups for anger, grief, etc.

## Evaluation

Educators in these districts talk about evaluation as a natural and important part of the improvement cycle. The pervasive expectation of evaluation — accountability within a culture of learning — may be the linchpin in these districts' improvement. See Spotlight 10 for an example from the Norman district of the increasing use in recent years of monitoring and feedback loops.

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### Spotlight 10. Monitoring and Feedback Loops, Norman Public Schools

Student, teacher, and parent surveys; student test data and portfolios; and site visits all provide rich data for Norman's evaluation efforts. Twice a year, a district team visits each school; in the fall they learn about the goals and action plans, and then in the spring they return to assess progress. According to one teacher, these visits have a "very relaxed, supportive environment with an exchange of information, questions, definitions, and celebration." At the same time, as one principal noted, everyone understands that "professional development must impact student learning and create greater teacher effectiveness."

Other means of evaluation include the number of hours of participation in professional development, feedback that indicates support and confidence from the community, the number of teachers with advanced degrees and National Board certification, presentations at state or national conferences, and state and national awards given to teachers, administrators, schools, and the district. Instead of an evaluation form that the district found ineffective, evaluation now concentrates on each site's school improvement plan, goals, and student achievement.

Professional development is included in the teacher-evaluation/appraisal process. All Norman staff have goals for professional development and are evaluated on their participation in professional development and professional growth. Principals' evaluations of teachers and, likewise, teachers' evaluations of principals include looking at goals set and whether student assessments provide evidence of accomplishment of those goals.

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While the districts differ in whether they tie teachers' individual growth plans, and results, to the performance appraisal cycle (most do), they all include processes for continual examination of student achievement, feedback from teachers, feedback about implementation, and formative feedback based on results to guide refinement of the professional development offerings.

Broward has a particularly comprehensive approach, following Guskey's (2000) framework for evaluation. Feedback is gathered from many layers and sources of evaluation for all aspects of professional development, and ranges from student test scores to teacher reactions to workshops. Furthermore, an inservice facilitator at every school is trained in high-quality professional development and serves as an on-site professional development specialist. Broward's comprehensive improvement process includes five evaluation levels: participants' reactions, participants' learning, organization support and change, participants' use of new knowledge and skills, and student learning outcomes.

# Implications for Action

For district leaders looking to move their organizations more fully into continuous improvement, some promising actions can be derived from the experiences of these districts. There is no one set of steps. Multiple actions, over time, will be needed. Nor is it possible to "check off and be done with" most of the actions that are required; rather, they recur in different forms and are revisited or reinforced as district practice evolves. But the following appear to be important ingredients. Those in *italics* especially emphasize considerations for building organizational culture.

## High-Quality Professional Development

- Study research and best practices on professional development and the change process.
- Establish standards for high-quality professional development.
- Require that district and school professional development follow these standards.
- *Involve the school community in developing the standards; teach an understanding of them.*
- *Include flexibility and choice.*

## Vision

- Keep a clear focus on student learning.
- Develop a comprehensive framework that articulates the district's view of how to impact student achievement through adult learning.
- Endorse this framework in school board policy.
- Design the system in accord with the framework.
- *Develop a community-wide shared focus and understanding of the game plan.*

## Communication

- Communicate the vision throughout the district.
- Establish regular channels of two-way communication throughout the district.
- *Communicate not only what, but why.*

## Roles and Structures

- Establish personnel policies that support the development of distributed leadership.
- Create committee structures that connect levels of the system.
- Establish formal partnerships with outside agencies.
- Develop schedules that provide time for adult learning.
- *Honor the development of expertise within the district.*
- *Foster the creation of communities of learners and leaders.*

## Data-Driven Decision-Making

- Require improvement plans for the district, schools, and individual teachers and administrators.
- Set criteria for the use of data to inform decisions and determine goals.
- Provide assistance in analysis and interpretation of data.
- Use data to align plans across levels of the system.
- Look at results; evaluate programs; set next steps for individuals and the organization.
- *Develop a sense of shared responsibility; establish appropriate accountability at multiple points.*
- *Cultivate a culture that expects progress measurable in results.*

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# Appendix: The Research Study

The National Awards Program for Model Professional Development honors schools and districts for their comprehensive and successful efforts to increase teacher and student learning through professional development. Applicants submit written information that is screened by a peer-review panel. Those that appear to meet the criteria are visited by a team of three reviewers, including a professional development expert and an accomplished teacher, who validate the information that was submitted. Award winners must demonstrate that their program of professional development is a comprehensive model that exemplifies the U.S. Department of Education's Mission and Principles of Effective Professional Development and that the program results in increased student learning. [Note: This awards program ended in 2001.]

Three Regional Educational Laboratories (WestEd, McREL, and NCREL) were funded to study nine of the award-winning districts. What does it look like when exemplary practices are established across an entire district? What policies are critical? How do people come to work in concert across different schools — and between district and schools — in ways that result in increased learning gains for students? The research study was designed to look in depth at these award-winning districts and provide answers to questions like these.

Review of the literature on the school district role in supporting school improvement, as well as informal lessons learned in conducting the National Awards Program, guided the development of the research methodology. A design team from the three laboratories worked together to refine interview questions organized into five broad content domains and appropriate to a wide range of stakeholder groups. In each district, individual or group interviews were conducted with key district administrators, school board members, parents, district and site committee members, principals, staff development specialists, union representatives, and classroom teachers.

Data collection took place during site visits in the winter and spring of 2001. Each district was visited for two or more days by a team of two or more trained site visitors, according to the size of the district. Standard data collection procedures were developed and training for site visitors was conducted in January. Further training of site visitors on data analysis and reporting was conducted in April.

Because the intention of this study was both to identify patterns across districts and to collect examples that could serve as helpful tools for others, many kinds of data were collected. Interviews were transcribed or documented in written protocols. Extensive artifacts such as district frameworks, planning documents, newsletters, and the like, were collected. Site visitors summarized this information in three ways. They wrote analytic memos summarizing key factors across interviews. They identified means-end sequences to indicate apparent attribution of cause and effect or problem-solving strategies articulated by respondents. They crafted narrative descriptions of the use of key tools in the district through a composite of interview information.

Data analysis and reporting were coordinated by WestEd. Interviews were coded by trained graduate assistants and these codes were catalogued using ATLAS TI qualitative software. Themes were identified and confirmed through a spiral sequence working outward from initial analysis districts through the entire set. Systematic coding and analysis were then conducted within themes and subthemes.

The other three of the twelve award-winning districts were included in a different study. The Center for Teaching Policy, headquartered at the University of Washington, was funded to study three of these award-winning districts as part of its larger research design. These districts — Geneva, New York; Edmonds, Washington; and San Francisco, California — became ancillary sites for the regional laboratory study. Information provided by the Center for Teaching Policy and a summer 2001 interview with a key district administrator were used to review and refine themes across the other districts.

systems that support learning

# improving districts

What can be learned from school districts that have been able to show improvement — not only in a few schools but throughout the whole district? This report, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, looks across nine districts that were honored for their demonstrated outcomes and practices by the department's National Awards Program for Model Professional Development.

In this succinct report, learn how these successful districts conceptualize and structure teacher professional development. Find out the role of vision and communication in moving a whole district into continuous improvement. What roles and structures are in place across these nine districts? And how do these districts used data-driven decision-making to initiate and keep their change efforts on track?

The districts range from the fifth largest in the United States, the Broward County (FL) Public School District, to districts serving midsized cities and suburbs. Student enrollment varies from 240,000 to 3,100, with districts where half of the students receive free or reduced-price lunch and districts where only one percent need assistance. The differences among these districts, however, only highlight what they share in common — successful systems for supporting change and continuous improvement.

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